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SUBJECT: GVN DEEMS FIRST DEFENSE DIALOGUE A SUCCESS

Ref: Hanoi 1178

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a variety of sidebar conversations during and following the first-ever U.S. Political Defense Dialogue in Hanoi (reftel), Government of Vietnam (GVN) interlocutors indicated that the talks went very well. While sensitivities on defense issues remain, GVN participants affirmed that from their perspective, the dialogue represented a significant step forward. The Vietnamese came into the talks with a certain degree of apprehension, and were impressed that the two sides were able to find common ground on agenda items and hit the right notes in the discussions themselves.

¶2. (SBU) COMMENT: We agree. The Vietnamese side was engaged, well-prepared, and eager to demonstrate that they took the talks seriously. This constructive attitude was particularly striking given that the talks represented the first time a GVN interagency delegation was assembled at this level to present coordinated views on defense relations and security cooperation with the United States. The GVN's willingness to continue the talks as a yearly event is by itself significant -- and was by no means a foregone conclusion. To be sure, much hard work remains to translate the positive atmospherics into tangible progress on, say, a joint search and rescue exercise. And, as MPS comments on "sensitive issues" -- human rights -- demonstrate, the two sides still have trust to build. Altogether, though, we concur that the talks mark a real step forward and something on which to build. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

¶3. (SBU) In sidebar conversations throughout the October 6 Political-Defense Dialogue, members of the GVN delegation expressed enthusiasm for the talks, the first ever between the United States and Vietnam, saying they were satisfied both with the topics covered and the depth of the discussion. The U.S. presentations and responses to GVN positions were additionally praised as being "on target", and appropriate to the level of discussion. All agreed the Dialogue represented a good start and would significantly deepen the bilateral relationship in the defense area. Senior delegation members Ministry of Defense (MOD) Senior Colonel Phan Thai Minh, Deputy Director, Department of External Relations and Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Senior Colonel Tam Chau, confirmed that the success of this dialogue will certainly result in an annual dialogue.

¶4. (SBU) Asked about the timing of the talks, Ministry of Defense representative Colonel Nguyen Quang Vinh Deputy Chief, Americas-Africa-Oceania Office, External Relations Department explained that it had taken many gradual steps for the GVN to reach sufficient internal agreement to hold formal talks at this level, and opined that the GVN is now ready to "gradually" strengthen the defense ties with the United States. Another MOD representative Phan Thai Minh pointed out that the Vietnamese side had itself had to make significant compromises to permit more than one U.S. ship visit per year, explaining that Vietnamese law only allows for one ship visit a year from any particular country.

(Note: The GVN determined the USNS Mercy visit did not count as a U.S. ship visit given that the visit was hosted by the Ministry of Health as a humanitarian mission. End note.)

15. (SBU) A somewhat discordant note was sounded by MPS Senior Colonel Tam Chau, who emphasized that while the Dialogue went well, much needs to be done to strengthen trust between the two countries. Specifically, he referred to "more sensitive issues" -- MPS-speak for human rights issues. More constructively, he expressed hope that many of the non-traditional security issues raised by MPS during the talks -- transnational crime, fighting terrorism, and combating illicit drugs -- could be addressed in more depth in future discussions.

PALMER